

Accidents Happen by kindness_to_the_rejects

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Summary:

El is late meeting with Hopper after school. She's guilty, Hop is worried, and Mike is just trying his best.

Accidents Happen

Max was teaching El how to skateboard the night that she was late.

The skateboarding was fun, more fun than El had expected it to be. Although she had known Max a year now, and attended school with her for a month, she had never learned how Max could control a board with wheels so well, and with only her feet. At first, when she still disliked Max, she hadn't felt inclined to ask. But then over the summer the two girls had finally realized they liked each other after all, and eventually, El had brought up the skateboard.

"How do you do that?" she asked hesitantly after school one day, as she saw Max doing a trick off the railing by the school's steps. "It's... cool."

Max shrugged and threw her orange hair over one shoulder. "It's not so hard with practice." Her eyes glittered like they did when she had an idea. "Wanna learn?" she asked. "You free after school today?"

El glanced over at Mike, who was talking with Dustin about something near the bike rack. She had plans with him, to walk to the diner and have a couple of milkshakes together, until she walked to the police station to meet Hopper at 5:00. Always 5:00.

"I don't know," she told Max. "Mike – "

Max groaned. "Ugh, you're always hanging out with Mike! What about just today, all three of us hang out or something? He can still come and watch us, or he can skateboard too!"

El hesitated. She liked being with just Mike, but she liked being with Max too. "That sounds fun – " she began.

"Great!" Max said. She cupped her hands over her mouth and shouted over at Mike, "Hey, Wheeler! I'm cancelling your date today so I can teach El how to skateboard!"

Mike looked up from his bike, appalled. "What! But we were going to get milkshakes!"

“Too bad, loser!” Max hooked her arm through El’s, and led her towards the side parking lot. “We’ll do it here. Trust me – it’ll be awesome.”

It was awesome. Even Mike had fun, once he got past being disgruntled over the loss of the milkshakes. They all took turns on the skateboard, and El and Mike fell off every other try. Max began pretending she was an Olympic judge, scoring how just how badly they were screwing up, and she set Mike and El off into hysterics of laughter with her pretend scores.

After a bit, the three of them sat in the grass and talked – about skateboarding, classes, their other friends. El made sure to check her watch she’d gotten from Hop last year, so she didn’t lose track of time. It was one of her favorite things: it was thin, simple, and silver. She always wore it on her left hand, and her blue hair tie she’d gotten from Hopper on her right.

It was 4:40 when the side door to the school opened, and the boys’ favorite teacher, Mr. Clarke, emerged, juggling a large cardboard box with something metal inside. Mike sat up hurriedly. “Oh, I forgot I wanted to ask him about something for AV Club,” he said, standing up and wiping grass off his pants. “El, I know you have to leave soon, so see you tomorrow, okay?” He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

Mike was well-acquainted with Eleven’s weekday 5:00 appointment at the police station. Hopper had drilled him on El’s rules when she started school. When he’d told Mike about her curfew, he’d had the stern look on his face which used to intimidate El, and still terrified Mike.

“Got time for one more?” Max asked. “I wanted you to practice on that sidewalk on the other side of the football field. The one that goes downhill? It’s so fun to skateboard down.”

El hesitated, unsure. “How long will it take?” she asked. “I have to meet Hop at 5:00.” She showed Max the time on her watch.

Max waved a hand. “Oh, plenty of time. We’ll just do it once today.

There and back.”

El didn't say anything, and instead fiddled with her watch. She had seen Max go down that hill before and had thought it looked fun. But...

“C'mon, El,” Max wheedled. She took El's hand in hers and squeezed it. “Live a little.”

Mike had told El once that she was a very ‘tactile’ person. When she asked what that meant, he said, “It's like, how you tell people you care about them is you touch them – hold their hand or hug them. And when people touch you, it tells you about their feelings.” She thought perhaps he was right. Maybe that's why she went along with Max to the sidewalk near the football field. Because she was a tactile person.

“Just once,” she agreed.

She checked her watch and knew she still had enough time left when they made it to the sidewalk, and she was still good on time when she was poised at the top of the sloped sidewalk on the skateboard, looking down.

“Alright,” Max told El, standing behind her. “Remember, just brace your feet, lock your knees, and hold out your arms for balance. You'll be fine, and it'll be so awesome.”

El nodded. She declined to remind Max that she could always right herself with her mind if she had to, because she wanted Max to think for a moment that she was normal, and she wanted herself to think that too. She decided not to use her mind as she went down the hill. If she took a tumble, she took a tumble, and she'd “rub some salt in it” as Hop would say. She kicked off from her still position and went.

It was fun and awesome, and she was fine – for about 30 seconds. And then the wheels of her skateboard caught on a stone or a sidewalk crack or something – and the board slid right out from under her.

She hit the pavement rather hard, but landed more on her tailbone

and back than on her head. Her left wrist also hit the pavement, which meant her silver watch did too.

She sat up from the ground, and looked at her watch immediately. The glass in front which guarded the clock face was gone, and the hands weren't moving, not even the hand that usually ticked away the seconds.

"Oh no," she said. Max was running toward her. "Oh no, oh no!" she said again. Her heart sank within her chest. She couldn't break this watch, she couldn't. It was the first nice thing she'd ever gotten that belonged just to her, and Hop had been the one to get it for her.

"Shit, shit, shit," she said. She felt tears prick in her eyes. She began looking on the sidewalk frantically around her, searching for the glass that had broken from her watch. She didn't see any glimmery shards, so maybe it didn't shatter, maybe it had just popped out whole, like she'd seen happen to part of Hop's sunglasses once.

"Shit, El!" Max said, crouching next to the other girl where she sat on the ground. "Are you okay?"

"Help me look!" El snapped, looking over at her.

"Look? Look for what?" Max asked, confused.

El stuck her wrist out for the other girl to examine the watch. "The glass!" she said. "It came out! We have to find it."

"Oh! Um, okay," Max agreed, confused. The two girls swept the sidewalk with their hands for a few minutes, trying to feel for the small, clear piece of glass. It was only when Max picked up her skateboard from where it had rolled away that they found it, hidden underneath. It was whole – but webbed with cracks.

Max handed it over regretfully. "I'm sorry, El," she said.

El didn't reply. She felt like she might cry if she tried.

It was only after they'd made their way back up the sidewalk and to

the school doors did El think about what time it was, and even then it was only because of Mike. He was just getting on his bike to head for home, having finished a no doubt lengthy AV Club discussion with Mr. Clarke, when he saw them coming from the football field.

“El!” he said, blanching. “What are you still doing here?”

She held out a hand to him, in which she held the broken glass and the unmoving watch. “It broke.” She said sadly.

Mike looked at her blankly. “El, I’m sorry it broke, but it’s,” he checked his own watch, still ticking, on his wrist, “It’s 5:03 right now. You have to leave now, or you’re going to be even later.”

For the second time that day, El felt her heart drop like a stone from dread. “Shit,” she said. “Hop will be mad.”

Mike looked at her desperately. “C’mon,” he said. He turned her bike towards her. “I’ll ride you there and it’ll go faster. Then Hop might not totally freak out.”

“He’ll be mad at you too if he sees you,” she said.

“I don’t care, come on,” he said urgently. She climbed on his bike behind and clutched his sweater. They were gone before Max could even finish saying goodbye.

When El crept through the doors of the police station, Flo was at the front desk, and she glanced at El and Mike from over her reading glasses. Flo liked El usually, but today she seemed unimpressed with her.

“He’s through there,” Flo said, pointing behind her with a pencil at the main office area behind her. “Good luck, kid.”

El and Mike exchanged a troubled look, and edged past the desk into the office space.

Hopper stood in the far corner, talking into the phone on the wall. His jacket was on but his hat was off and clenched in his hand, which

he had propped on his hip. The other hand was braced above the telephone, and he leaned on it. He was talking to someone.

“And she’s not with Will?” he asked. There was a pause, then, “Shit. Does Will know where Mike is? She might be with him – “

El cleared her throat. Mike was hovering behind her, nervous.

Hopper turned around at the sound, and saw them. He didn’t change his expression except that his eyebrows lowered, hooding his eyes.

“Actually Joyce, she’s here,” he said flatly. “Yeah, she’s just late. Thanks. Bye.”

He hung up the phone in its cradle and turned back to Mike and El. He put both hands on his hips.

“You ok?” he asked El gruffly. She nodded.

“Nothing’s wrong, no end-of-world shit, no injuries, nothing?” he asked.

She shook her head.

He nodded and put his hat on his head. He looked at Mike. “Get going, kid.”

Mike stammered, “She - she didn’t mean to be late, sir. I – “

“Kid, get goin’ now, before I get even more pissed off,” Hop said, pointing at the door. “I’m offering you an out here, and you should take it.”

El looked back at Mike and nodded at him. With a quiet, “Bye, El,” he was gone.

El turned to Hopper. “I’m sorry,” she began. He cut her off.

“I don’t want to talk until we get home,” Hop said tightly. “C’mon. Let’s head.”

“But – “

“El,” he said sharply, turning from where he’d made it to the door. “I am pissed off right now. It is 5:22,” he jabbed a finger at the clock on the wall behind her, “And you didn’t call and I am pissed, but I promised myself I would try harder not to get angry with you, so in the car ride home, we are not going to talk, and I’m going to cool off so I don’t yell at you before I even know if you deserve it or not, understand?”

She nodded hesitantly, and he took a breath.

“Good. Now let’s go.”

The ride home was silent, just like Hopper had said it would be. He turned on the radio at least, and halfway home he started to tap his thumbs against the wheel in time to the music. Eleven took it to be a good sign.

When they got home, he said. “You can go put your school stuff away. I’ll start dinner and then we’ll talk, alright?” He looked over at her.

She nodded, and whispered, “Alright.”

Once El’s book bag was in her room, and her shoes were lined up in her closet, and once their microwave dinners were on the table – only then, when they sat together in front of their dinners did he look up at her and say, “So. Tell me what happened. Why were you late today?”

He didn’t sound angry when he said it, so El immediately launched into her story. She’d been holding it in since the police station, desperate for him to understand.

“And then I fell off the skateboard,” she said, wrapping up. He was listening to her wordlessly, smoking a cigarette as their food got cold. “And my watch broke,” she said holding out her wrist. “And,” her voice caught. “And you gave me the watch and I liked it, so I looked all over for the glass part, and we found it, but it was broken. But we spent too long doing that, and then we ran into Mike, and he told me

what time it was.”

She leaned forward in her seat earnestly. “I’m sorry,” she said. She was crying, now. She couldn’t stop thinking about the watch – the watch from him – and the way he’d sounded so worried on the phone with Joyce. “I didn’t mean to, I’m sorry – “

“Kid, kid,” he said holding up a hand. “Stop. It’s alright. This was an accident right? You didn’t mean to be late?”

She nodded tremulously, and wiped at the tears on her cheek.

“El,” he said, reaching across the table to squeeze her hand. “It’s alright. The watch can be fixed. I can think of three stores off the top of my head that fix watches for you, easy. They’ll get it working again.”

“Really?” she asked, hopeful.

“Really,” he said. “Accidents happen.”

He picked up his fork, took a bite of mashed potatoes. After a moment, he said, “I was just scared. You know – I like you to be on time so I know you’re safe.”

“I know,” she said. “That’s why I like it when you’re on time, too.”

“Right,” Hop said, nodding. “But for me – it’s even more important. Because you’re my kid. And when you have a kid – it’s,” he stopped, thought about it, continued, “It’s your job to keep them safe. It’s your responsibility. More like, keeping them safe is what you want to do more than anything.” He fixed her with a look. “You understand?”

She nodded again. There was a moment of quiet while they chewed, and then she said quietly, “You didn’t yell.”

He looked up at her in surprise. “No, I didn’t. Been trying to work on that. Did I do a good job?”

She nodded, smiling. “Good job.”

“Yeah, I thought we’d give calm communication a try,” he said,

smiling back as he leaned back in his seat. “Keeping that in mind, I want to let you know – I know this was an accident, but El, this can’t happen again any time soon.”

She paused, her fork halfway back down to her plate. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he paused again, sighed. “Look, you know how I haven’t been late for a long time, but I was that one time in July?”

She nodded. “You were very late that time,” she said pointedly.

He gave her an unamused look. “Yeah, well, it was an accident then with me, too. But since that happened and I knew it made you unhappy, I made sure to be extra careful for a few weeks afterward, to not start big projects right before I had to leave work or something. You understand? You’re allowed to have mistakes, but... not too many. You gotta be careful now, so it doesn’t happen again. So you learn from this.”

El considered that for a moment. “What did I learn from this?” she asked him.

“To not skateboard with Max down a damn hill, for one thing,” Hop said, rolling his eyes. “What were you doing, falling off your board? You do have mind powers don’t you? Couldn’t you have caught yourself or something?”

She stiffened. “Skateboarding is hard,” she said delicately. “Accidents happen.” She gave him a pointed look, parroting his words back at him. He rolled his eyes.

“Yea, yea,” he said, hauling himself out of his seat to take his plate to the sink. He turned around to look at her. “The point is, if these types of accidents happen too often, you won’t get off as easy as you did tonight. Understand?”

She began to nod, but then asked, “How often?”

He looked back at her confused. “What?”

“How often can I make mistakes without making you mad?”

“Hmm...” He finished rinsing off his plate and dropped it in the sink. “Once every three months. You can be late because of a mistake that often. If you’re ever late on purpose, that’s a different story, but if it’s mistake, that’s the deal. Sound good?”

“You too,” she said, pointing her fork at him. He raised his eyebrows. “You too,” she said forcefully. “Only late once every three months.”

He looked like he was about to protest, but then he shook his head and chuckled. “Fine, kid. New house rule for everyone”

She jabbed her meatloaf with her fork, satisfied. She thought that was it, but then he asked, “What was the Wheeler kid doing at the police station? Did he give you a ride on his bike?”

“Yes,” she said. “He didn’t want me to be even later, he said.”

“Huh,” Hop turned back around, turned on the sink to start dishes. “Well, I guess that was...decent of him.” Hop had had an uneasy opinion of Mike ever he saw him kissing El outside of the gymnasium once.

“You sound ‘begrudging,’” El said carefully.

Hop raised an eyebrow at her over his shoulder. “Begrudging? Where the hell did you learn that?”

“School,” she said simply. “It means, ‘to be reluctant to give, grant, or allow.’ I think it means you don’t want to say Mike was decent.”

Hop grunted noncommittedly. There was silence as he washed and El ate, until he said, begrudgingly, “I guess, since the Wheeler kid was watching out for you and since he remembered your curfew...”

El perked up immediately. “Yes?”

He turned around and leaned against the counter, flipping the towel over his shoulder. He crossed his arms and looked at her. “I suppose,” he said. “That means he can stay a little later when he comes over Sunday night to study with you. Since he was a gentleman and all, maybe he can stay...” he hesitated. “Until 8:00 instead of 7:00. If it’s okay with his mom.”

El leaped from her chair, beaming. "I'll tell him!" she said, headed for her room and the radio walkie talkie she used to talk to Mike.

"Hey, kid!" Hop called after her. "Your dishes? Remember? Ringing a bell?"

She was already in her room, no doubt flopped on her bed calling the Wheeler kid. He sighed and nabbed her plate from the table, threw her silverware in the sink. He was just about to scrape the leftovers of her dinner into the trash when he felt thin, strong arms wrap around his waist and hug him from behind.

"Thank you," El mumbled against his shirt. "For not yelling. For Sunday night. For everything."

He smiled. "Any time kid," he said. "Any time."